

GO LOCAL TO SURVIVE



**Decentralisation In Local
Government**

95p

**LABOUR
CO-ORDINATING
COMMITTEE**

Preface

Decentralisation is a policy of confrontation. It confronts the despair and cynicism of Central and Local Government neglect. It provides better, more accessible services and offers people an opportunity to have control over their own lives. It is socialism in action at local level, and has formed the main plank of many Labour election manifestos. Labour will be judged on its success.

Decentralisation is not merely a bureaucratic change in the way that Councils provide their services. It is a change in the philosophy of local government. It is giving power to local people, Councillors, bureaucrats, and even trade unions will have to come to terms with this. Old attitudes which ignored peoples' needs will lead to the destruction of local services and jobs, and an end to local democracy. The Labour Party has an obligation to its electorate to confront these attitudes from wherever they come.

Even if local government wasn't struggling for its existence, we as socialists demand more control over every part of our lives. This includes collective provision of housing, childcare, libraries or whatever. It is not enough for the state, out of its concern for us, to provide all these benefits in the way it sees fit – we want a system where we can run these services for ourselves.

Decentralisation is Councilspeak for running as many of these services as possible from neighbourhood offices. Each office might serve about 10,000 people. Tenants could not only pay their rent at these offices but could report repairs that needed to be done, arrange an appointment for workers to come over to fix whatever needed fixing. Many councils have already organised these local repair teams even before they have started to implement fuller decentralisation. What's more, the system actually works.

Decentralisation has usually been initiated by councillors rather than by council workers or tenants – though council building workers and some tenants associations have worked out some of the best ideas on housing. It will be difficult to involve people in the running of the services, when the council has never given them a say in the past, until they see things improving and that it is therefore worth getting involved.

It might also be difficult to break down some of the rivalries between different groups of professionals, such as housing officers and social workers, that often results in people being sent from department to department to get their problem dealt with. Which services should be based at local offices, and which would be centralised? Are Council workers right to suspect that going local will stimulate demand for services and make them work harder, without providing the extra resources to do the job? How will councils meet existing needs when their rates are capped, never mind have a full-scale reorganisation? This pamphlet will discuss the problems councillors implementing decentralisation will face.

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The LCC wishes to promote decentralisation in local government and, whilst not endorsing every point contained in this pamphlet, publishes it with the intention of furthering discussion.

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LABOUR
CO-ORDINATING
COMMITTEE

Socialists and Local Government

Michael Heseltine and Patrick Jenkin have pushed local government to the centre of attention of socialists. No longer was Town Hall business just about housing and home helps, libraries and lampposts, drains, dustbins and social workers – it offered the chance to lead the working class into battle against Tory cuts in central government subsidies, in the tradition of Lansbury of Poplar and the Skinners of Clay Cross.

It is now a far cry from the heady days of 1921 when thousands of East Enders marched to Brixton Prison to protest against the jailing of the Mayor and other Poplar councillors who refused to 'collect a rate for outside bodies' until the Government coughed up more money.

But then the Liberals were divided and crumbling and Labour was rising. There was tremendous industrial militancy and political fervour following people's high expectations after the War. The Labour Party had everything going for it.

Poplar Council carried out numerous radical and popular policies on minimum wages, equal pay for women, massive improvements in services, house building and so on. Since then we have had five Labour Governments. Socialism is now associated with bureaucracy. The Welfare State is undoubtedly a gain for the working class but has been tainted by its undemocratic and bureaucratic structure and by the resulting inefficiency. Of course, like nationalised industry, its co-existence with private provision has constantly warped its effectiveness. During capitalist recession its weaknesses are highlighted still further.

The working class has changed a lot since those exciting days sixty three years ago. Most of the old working class communities are gone – even in the mining towns and villages in the North, let alone in massively redeveloped working class districts in the big cities. The East London docks, alongside the furniture, boot and shoe and clothing industries have long since become shadows of their former selves – their communities dispersed to the new towns and many of those who remained are now unemployed.

Back to backs and terraced streets have been replaced by tower blocks, making any kind of human contact, let alone class solidarity, more difficult.

Any new effective class solidarity will have to accommodate itself not only to new modern ways of living and working but be genuinely supportive of women and black people in their battles against oppression. Our movement cannot succeed in fighting capitalist attacks in the workplace, on our social services or anywhere else if it continues to be dominated by white men. Local authorities often fail to recognise that women use their services more frequently – and to reorganise accordingly.

Amongst the welfare services, those provided by local government are often the most criticised. Ironically, the most popular service is the NHS which is completely out of the hands of local authorities. (Not that the NHS provides a better service, necessarily, it just gets criticised less.) However, some opinion polls suggest greater satisfaction with council services, even council housing, than you would think, given the clamour.

Only very recently have progressive Labour Councils become really aware of this dismal legacy. They have tried to improve services, but have been frustrated by Central Government decisions to withhold the local authorities own money – money paid by local taxpayers that should have been channelled to councils through the Rate Support Grant for the benefit of local people.

When Michael Heseltine was Secretary of State for the Environment he set a target for each council's spending. Every few months councillors had to amend budgets so that they met this target, or else lose government subsidy. Councillors had to act like limbo dancers. They had to dance under Heseltine's bar. About twice a year the bar was lowered.

GEORGE LANSBURY



Walter Scott

CLAY CROSS, July 1973



Joe Bulaitis



SHEFFIELD DAY OF ACTION, January 1982

Steve Barnett/Labour Party Photo Library

Late in 1980 Heseltine played a particularly unpleasant trick. He withdrew even more subsidy than he said he would the previous March. Lambeth Council, to give one example had three options: cut services, raise rates, or do neither and thus go bankrupt. This was like choosing between being hung, shot or drowned. Lambeth chose to make the people pay more. They reaped a whirlwind of protest. Not only from owner occupiers but from council tenants. No gratitude for pegging their rents for three years! Where were all the people who had marched with Lambeth Council against the cuts only fifteen months before? The truth was that the council workers had marched — and the council tenants had been indifferent.

The people weren't indifferent to spending more money to make up the shortfall from the Government — as the Council propaganda so carefully explained. They believed that the Council wasted their money and they supplied numerous examples of inefficiency. Many also believed that Ted Knight, the Leader of Lambeth Council, had chosen to fight the Government for his own egotistical, political, ends and that they, the ordinary people, had to pick up the bill.

If it wasn't clear before then it was glaringly obvious in February 1981 that council services were literally indefensible. The users, especially the tenants — the most important group of all — would not defend them. The way was clear for the Tories to do what they liked — privatisation, penalties and rate capping. Remember that Lothian Council collapsed when the Tories capped Scottish rates some time ago. Labour lost control of the council at the next election.

The trouble is that councillors have enormous responsibility but little power. Power requires money to pay for adequate house repairs, clean streets, home helps, nursery provision and other responsibilities. Power also requires a suitable method for meeting all these various needs. Despite these manifest weaknesses councillors often take a 'leave it to me' attitude when dealing with constituents' complaints. They promise to use their influence to weave an effective way through their own bureaucracy. The bureaucracy that requires ratepayers to enter many offices before they reach the appropriate officer who can deal with their problem.

They have not encouraged residents or workers to get involved in the problems of local government. So it is no surprise when these workers and residents feel no responsibility for the problems of councillors penalised by central government. Decentralisation offers the possibility to change this relationship — to enable the users of services to have more control over them.

Without the people, local councillors can achieve very little. If Westminster doesn't want them to. The experience of fighting cuts throughout the 70s is depressing. Over ten years ago Clay Cross Urban District Council was left isolated in its fight against the rent rise prescriptions of the Housing Finance Act. They at least appeared to have substantial support within Clay Cross itself. More recently, Lambeth and Lothian attempted to develop local support to defeat government cuts. They were defeated. Will Liverpool, Sheffield and the others fare better?

It is this horrifying prospect that the people won't defend their services that makes decentralisation essential. Unless the services are delivered more locally so that people can use them more easily then they will be dismantled or diminished. To make matters worse, councils will almost certainly be obliged to achieve this ambitious project using *less* resources than they have now. Changing local government is therefore a precondition for defending it effectively.

Raising rates is unpleasant and may soon be illegal above a certain amount. The main problem with going bankrupt (apart from the Authority imposed by the Tories being even worse) is that it relies on massive popular support to make such a dramatic gesture worthwhile. It seems that most of the bankrupters see their strategy as a mean to an end – greater radicalisation of working people through confrontation. They are less concerned with the mundane duties of local government. The trouble for them is that most people are interested only in these mundane details, and not very interested in the Council as a political institution they should defend.

Part of the value of decentralisation is that it also is primarily concerned with these mundane details. How many neighbourhood offices should there be? Which council officers will work from these offices and which officers from districts or from the Town Hall? Exactly which powers will be granted to which committees of users (eg. District Housing Committees) and how will these people be elected or appointed? Will there be workers in the Neighbourhood Offices who will do the jobs directly for people who come in – eg. glazing, plumbing or carpentry on estates – or will they only be able to log complaints?

Socialists who have previously 'fought cuts' and defended public services as something that is generally good and vaguely socialist will now have to consider in detail why these services are valuable and exactly how they should be provided. Councillors by necessity, have concerned themselves with these intimate details. They will have to consider how much of their power they should give up. Socialists may find it easy to win control of a local authority by winning control of local Labour Party General Committees. Most left councillors shudder at the risk of surrendering power to local committees because they are not used to fighting for their politics at this level. That is something we shall all have to learn.

At its most ambitious, decentralisation promises to change the provider-consumer relationship between the Council and the people. The users of council services will be able to do more than complain – they will have a share in how their services are provided – they will share responsibility for this provision. A word of caution is necessary. People might need to see the new structures begin to work before they choose to get involved with them. Until people see results they may consider the decentralisation proposals to be nothing more than the usual hot air that rises up from the Town Hall – expensive hot air at that. On the other hand, if the structure is fundamentally changed but without allowing any room for that popular involvement right from the start, then it might be very difficult to bring it in later on.

Going Local is the fundamental response necessary to meet the devastating challenge to local government from the Tories. It is high-risk, but small changes won't take us very far compared with the problems we face. We therefore intend to examine all the tentative measures that the councils most advanced in their plans have made so far.

The Problem

Thus, every socialist should be asking: what is wrong with my local council, and how should a socialist party be trying to change it? We must begin by identifying in a little more detail the present intrinsic problems with local authorities, their shortcomings and some elements of their reactionary nature.

The manifold growth of municipal enterprise during the Labour Governments of the 'fifties and 'sixties was motivated largely by the post-war drive for fairer shares, greater equality and a compassionate concern for human needs. It is a striking paradox, therefore, that this massive expansion of the 'local welfare state' has resulted in the impersonal, ineffectual, disparate monolith that comprise council departments today. It is a patent failure of the socialist movement that the provision of far greater resources was not at all accompanied by consideration as to how best to utilise these resources.

Personnel and management methods are based on the national civil service (the belief that council officers are neutral servants of councillors who provide the political direction), transformed over recent years by methods introduced from industry. There are also parallels with the armed forces with 'militaristic' domination of discrete hierarchies by 'chief officers', compounded by the patronising elitism of professional experts. Party administrations, Labour no less than Tory, have themselves also evolved local versions of the national, centralised, ministerial methods of organisation; and these have marginalised them from the bureaucratic power-bases as well as distanced them from the constituents who provide their electoral base.

Over the years, new council departments have been grafted on here and there, with little thought for proper integration. Hence the fragmentation which characterises the loose groupings of 'functions' performed by today's local authorities. Divisions abound, which weaken the ability of the council to provide effective services, and which render local authorities of dubious value in a socialist perspective. 'Blue-collar' workers are divided from 'white-collar' by differing sets of working conditions and agreements, for example. And files and information are jealously guarded by groups of staff in different buildings, preventing other staff from finding out what's going on, and ensuring that the public can never appreciate the full picture.

So the current organisation of local government frustrates us all: the public with its users and community groups; the workforce with its unions and professional groups; and the politicians with their party agencies. The public are frustrated because the services are so poor, the council staff and systems are too remote, bureaucratic, unresponsive and inflexible. They mistrust the local political system, correctly believing it to be undemocratic.

The workforce are frustrated by restrictive and spurious management methods. The huge inefficient bureaucracies, of which they are but tiny cogs, prevent them doing their jobs properly. Little relevant co-operation is practicable between departments. They experience enormous and divisive differentials of pay and power; and they suffer career systems which systematically remove them from whatever they become good at, rather than promoting service improvements and job satisfaction.

Labour councillors are frustrated because they cannot get their policies

implemented. This is caused by a combination of the bureaucratic structures, the shortage of resources, and the diminution of local authority autonomy to the status of little more than cyphers of the national government. Whatever instructions councillors give to Chief Officers, they find it almost impossible to really change the way the council operates. As described above, councillors (at least the conscientious ones) tend to find themselves bound up in detailed case-work and minute policy details and quickly lose any clear concept of political direction.

It is possible to identify a number of reactionary features, which history has woven into the fabric of contemporary local government. One such feature is *professionalism*, that 'expert power' exerted by town hall solicitors, architects, etc, because of the systematic assumption that they hold the monopoly of applicable knowledge. Social workers also borrow the trappings of elite superiority and succeed in minimising any influence by clients over events.

A second manifestation of capitalist values within local government practices may be termed '*managerialism*', which lends to the rigid hierarchies within departments and with the tendency always to prioritise fiscal control and to measure efficiency solely in financial terms. 'Rationalisations' are pursued, which invariably turn out to be centralisations of services and resources, and often cuts in staff.

Thirdly, we may term as '*departmentalism*' that blinkered approach to operations, identified above, which inhibits relevant co-ordination between staff in different but related areas of work, and which constantly gives users the impression that council workers care more for the system than for the users themselves. Tenants may be dying on housing estates, but it's not the Housing Manager's fault that the Building Trade Operative didn't effect the repairs, and it's not the BTO's fault that Head Office sat on the job ticket for three weeks, and so on.

Finally, we should be aware of the way that these three influences affect the conduct of local government trades unions, particularly those of white-collar workers. Professionalism is translated into freedom of career and promotion prospects. Managerialism is countered by restrictive work practices and by dogged adherence to job descriptions. Departmentalism becomes rigid job demarcation. Thus town hall trade unionism contributes greatly to the inertia discovered by all would-be local government reformers. Moreover, British trade unions have always been particularly unwilling to raise any issue which is not strictly limited to wages and working conditions.

Such a disheartening scenario contributed to Cynthia Cockburn's conviction that local government is such a key anti-working class weapon of the state in a capitalist society that it is quite impossible for a Labour council to respond remedially to local needs (see *The Local State*, Pluto 1973). Radical decentralisation challenges such defeatism no less than it threatens the problems with local authorities sketched above. It asks us to start from scratch, with the way that tenants and residents themselves perceive their own neighbourhood life. It insists that we expect of our local systems of government that they actually help us to solve our problems. It makes it obvious how faulty is the view that public provision is automatically more effective than private, that ownership is more important than management. It gives us a strategy for political intervention.

The New Approach

Decentralisation encompasses a whole series of changes in how local councils operate. It means more than just localising access and delivery to services. We are certainly not talking about the SDP interpretation which involves privatisation, limiting trade unions and encouraging the unemployed to provide services without pay. We are talking about promoting direct worker/user co-operation and influence; about establishing local control on the streets and estates; about encouraging officers to work as part of a neighbourhood team; about striving towards self-servicing communities which, in time, will evolve into socialist communities. These are ambitious objectives, but we doubt whether the services can be improved at all the way they are organised now.

This is why the localising initiative is the most promising attempt to improve the quality of the welfare state since its inception. Not that we can ignore the cuts, but we do need a socialist response which can both defend the quality of welfare spending with an attack on some of the malignant structures and practises within local government which make it so weak and unattractive – and difficult to defend.

Improving services, more user/worker co-operation and a shifting of control away from the Town Hall will stimulate a local participation democracy. Tenants and community groups would want to become more involved in a neighbourhood-based local authority. A council's workforce, enjoying the effectiveness of working directly with the public, could develop much more worker participation and other democratic 'management practices'. And councillors, increasingly released from their roles as full-time long-stops for case-work problems, will be able to concentrate much more on representing and developing the real interests of local people.

Most people are more interested in their family, neighbours, street, estate and workplace than in their borough or city. They wouldn't normally get excited about wanting to help to decide how to spend public money. Neighbourhood-based offices and workshops with substantial local budgets might, however, capture their imaginations in productive and progressive ways.

The problem would quickly emerge of competition over resources between neighbourhoods and projects. Socialism demands a wider than parochial awareness and a co-ordination of efforts to promote the interests of the oppressed, to safeguard minority rights, and to oppose racism and sexism. Expanding democratic participation would exacerbate the tensions and contradictions at all levels of local government: between neighbourhoods, sections of staff, Labour Party factions, and different borough councils. Careful planning will be needed to promote progressive tensions and to erase adverse conflicts. Current developments in '*popular planning*' are valuable complementary initiatives too. All localising councils will have to elaborate new 'career systems', which will promote effective co-operation with the public and user-groups without removing good workers from what they are good at. Freedom of

information will be essential in Neighbourhood Centres to demystify services and to provide adequate data for effective popular planning. Opening the books to the neighbourhoods will in turn require the extensive provision of new technology.

To all policies which claim to be socialist must the question be asked: what does it offer the oppressed? Socialism demands individual power and freedom for *all*: women, the unemployed, black people, disabled people, lesbians, gay men, ethnic and all minority groups – the whole of the 'working class'. Some Black people fear, however, that neighbourhood office staff will not reflect the ethnic composition of the area. They are worried that neighbourhood office managers will be recruited on the basis of 'best man for the job'. That is, they will be male, white and middle-class. Now most managers might not, in fact, be new appointments, but be redeployed from existing central offices, and that there will be no proper selection procedures. That is, the NOs would have to employ all officers of a certain grade. Existing racist attitudes will be carried over to the NOs. Even if acceptable Neighbourhood Office managers were appointed, how much power would remain at the centre, for example in the hands of deputy directors of social services?

Councils will have to build into their decentralisation strategy their policies (if they have any) to fight racism and sexism. A lot of racism is experienced on the local level, so smaller does not necessarily mean less racist. Centres should have childcare facilities, and should be accessible for disabled people, and so on. The Neighbourhood Centre should become the community cultural focus too.

Some Councillors might protest "we're on your side. Why are you challenging us?" Yet even those Councillors who are trusted by Black people must be open to criticism – especially for policies that may not have been fully thought out.

The Thatcherite attack upon the welfare state focusses upon the issue of choice and freedom. If the market principle holds, so the old argument goes, then it introduces the element of choice and accountability which is so manifestly missing within the bureaucratic welfare state at the moment. Thus, if you're dissatisfied with the school your children attend you take your money elsewhere. In this way the school is given direct feedback with 'clout' – people have put their money where their mouths are. In this way providers have to take notice of users, because otherwise the market for their service (and hence their jobs) will disappear. The same holds with services which are collectively consumed – the local authority puts its building maintenance contracts out to tender and if they're dissatisfied with the service provided they take their money elsewhere.

Of course, in reality we all know that the market doesn't really bring much choice and accountability with it. Producers have ways of combining so that market freedom becomes restricted and, above all, the market introduces a fundamentally non-egalitarian principle into the consumption of services, namely the more money you have, the greater your choice. Nevertheless there is a sufficiently substantial grain of truth in the concept of market freedom when compared with bureaucratic unfreedom for it to frequently win the day. For as things stand today what choice has the average council tenant in determining the accommodation she/he receives? What choice has the patient over what her doctor prescribes? What choice do women and pensioners have over the routeing and timetabling of bus services? What choice do the elderly have over the kind of day centre provision a local council gives them? People are not daft; they know that they have virtually no choice and no power over the services provided by

the welfare state at the moment. And as they become disillusioned with the welfare state they become disenchanted with socialism, which they associate with a bureaucratic state, one identified either with the local town hall or with the Kremlin (indeed there are a number of town halls and housing department office blocks up and down the country which are known affectionately as 'the Kremlin').

We have an excellent chance to attack the idea that the market is the only guarantor of choice and accountability, for in place of Labourism's bureaucratic planning, decentralisation offers not market regulation but direct democracy. Thus the decentralisation initiative is not just a local affair but is a vital experiment for socialism in its struggle against the principles and practices of capitalism. If we cannot establish that socialist planning is compatible with direct democracy and capable of being responsive to human need, then an alternative vision to crude capitalism will be hard indeed to establish.

The radical decentralisation initiative therefore poses a number of questions vital to the socialist project as a whole. Is it possible to combine elements of central planning with elements of local democracy? Can direct democracy contend with the splits and divisions within localities which have become endemic in our society — splits between black and white, employed and unemployed, old and young, men and women, and so on — or are these splits so huge that we need some inhuman agency such as the market or the bureaucracy to regulate our social relationships for us? Can worker self-management of large and complex organisations become an effective reality or can it only work in small co-operative type units? Is it possible to produce democratic forms which unite producers and consumers in such a way that what is produced meets consumer need rather than the imperatives of production?

These are all vital questions for socialism where decentralisation might provide us with some answers. After Thatcher's landslide victory, even the most hardened socialist must have wondered if socialism had any future. In coming to terms with our defeat and the need to re-evaluate the basics of our politics, the experience of the Party in Walsall, Islington and elsewhere could have tremendous value to us. The time is not for safe bets, we need risk taking, pushing things to their limits. There are already signs in some places that the decentralisation initiative is being fudged and often it's those on the Labour left who are responsible for the fudging.

An experiment of this magnitude cannot be done without encountering great difficulties. Decentralisers will need a lot of conviction, and our colleagues from Walsall have provided an excellent example. If we don't want to get involved in a fight, then we may as well not bother in the first place; because what we will end up with will be so compromised that decentralisation will be given a bad name.

Previous Experience

Decentralisation is just one of a number of strategies to provide truly socialist public services.

Another, older, strategy is to develop patterns of public provision outside the state. These may assume a variety of forms — mutual aid organisations, state funded but independent community organisations (law centres, family centres, etc. financed by local authorities and sometimes through the Department of the Environment's 'Urban Programme'), voluntary organisations, etc. Very often such organisations are involved in an implicit or explicit critique of the other major public service provider, namely, the welfare state. In Britain this strategy began to first attract the attention of socialists in the late 1960s (though it should be realised that in the previous century this approach to public service provision was the dominant strategy adopted by working class and socialist organisations). By the mid-70s this strategy had attracted so much support that it became possible to speak of the emergence of an 'urban social movement'.

Decentralisation aims to give public provision socialist, as opposed to bureaucratic, form. Perhaps the first major criticism of public services was in the pamphlet 'In and Against the State'. In the early '70s some professional groups within the welfare state criticised existing practices. Perhaps the best example was the radical social workers group gathered around 'Case Con', though similar groups of radical architects, psychologists, teachers, etc. formed around their own small journals. Undoubtedly this strategy was first put into practice by Labour councillors in Walsall from 1980-2.

Interestingly enough, current political developments in the sphere of decentralisation have linked in only loosely with their theoretical antecedents. Thus neither councillors in Walsall nor subsequently in Hackney, Islington, Camden, etc. have been able to link their own decentralisation initiative with a critique of public services by the professionals themselves.

None of these boroughs have really grasped the need to confront existing working practices — social workers may well continue to disable their clients albeit in a more responsive and accountable context. Thus current decentralisation initiatives which have been developed by councillors (who are, after all, employers) must connect with the efforts of radical professionals (the employees) if a thoroughgoing experiment in socialist forms of state service provision is to be mounted.

Thus current decentralisation initiatives need to be seen as one aspect of a potentially two-pronged effort to develop socialist forms of public service provision. The main objectives of these contemporary initiatives are:

1. To physically relocate services so that they are 'closer to the public';
2. To remove some of the power of the senior and central professional and managerial strata of local government, and to redistribute it to the consumers of local government services.

Local committees have been organised on a '*mass meeting*' basis at the neighbour-

hood level since the establishment of the modern Yugoslavian state in the 1940s. Since 1974, alongside these local committees, a system of 'user group' committees has also developed. (A local committee would represent 'the neighbourhood' whereas user groups represent particular sections of the community — eg. the elderly — who use particular services).

In Italy, starting under the Communist Party administration in Bologna, a network of neighbourhood committees have arisen within local government since the early 1960s. In Bologna eighteen of these committees now exist. On each one there are twenty representatives of the city's political parties, each parties' representation being proportionate to its strength within the city council. In other words, elections are 'indirect'. Since 1976 however a 'Municipal Decentralisation Law', which sanctified the Bologna model, has ruled that neighbourhood councils which are empowered with formal decision-making (as opposed to advisory) powers must be subject to direct election.

The pre-1976 Bologna model of indirectly elected advisory neighbourhood committees has existed in Norway (concentrated on Oslo) for much of the 1970s. In Oslo, thirty-three neighbourhood committees each with thirteen representatives are elected by the City Council on a party basis.

Initiatives to relocate services closer to the consumer are few and far between. Walsall is the first systematic attempt to pursue this. The new Labour group of councillors who won the elections in May 1980 immediately set about an ambitious programme of decentralisation. This started with the Housing Department but was intended eventually to include the full range of council welfare services. Although the council's Chief Executive had suggested that they would be lucky to open even their first neighbourhood office within three years, within two years the Labour group had managed to establish a complete set of thirty-three neighbourhood offices.

Unfortunately Labour lost control of the council in May 1982 during the national swing to the Conservatives in the local government elections at that time. This meant that the further development of the initiative from its housing base was ruled out for the time being. By May 1982 however the councillors had already made massive strides. The original Housing Department which was based almost entirely in the Town Hall was dismantled and about three quarters of its 200 staff were pushed out into the neighbourhood offices along with 70-80 newly appointed 'sympathetically-minded' officers. The neighbourhood offices were situated in recognisable neighbourhoods. They were open-plan and designed to be 'friendly and welcoming'. Apart from normal working hours they were open one evening a week and on Saturday mornings. There was no receptionist, the main jobs carried out at the office were rent and rate collection, housing management, housing and community services, the management of a small budget and information and advice sessions.

Although many of the existing staff were fairly resistant to the changes envisaged it does seem that many, once placed close to the public in the neighbourhood offices, began to derive much greater satisfaction from their work. It soon became clear that the public also appreciated the newly decentralised service for when the Conservatives gained control in May 1982 and tried to shut down all of the offices, public opposition was such that to date only one office has been closed. Walsall's imaginative initiative has, then, been put into cold-store over the past two years, but is surviving.

Current State of Play

Following the example of Walsall, several local authorities are at the stage of starting to implement decentralisation or currently developing proposals. In this section we will provide a brief sketch of progress so far. The plans of the most advanced authorities are summarised in Table 1. Changes in plan are occurring from month to month (sometimes even from week to week) so that some of this information will unfortunately be out of date when you read this pamphlet.

Hackney

Hackney and Islington were the two authorities to make the fastest initial progress following the local elections in May 1982. Hackney organised a series of public consultation meetings before any plan or even a series of options were produced. The number of areas under consideration at the end of the exercise was between twenty-three and thirty-one. Then when a second wave of public consultation was due to begin, the process was brought to a sudden halt. This was for two reasons. One was political disagreements amongst the group of Labour councillors about how far decentralisation should go. The first radical 'Redprint' was disowned and a second more cautious set of proposals did not win much enthusiasm. The second reason was NALGO refusing to co-operate with decentralisation until a list of demands were met. After more than a year's delay it now looks as if the second problem has been ironed out, but the political commitment of the Council has continued to falter. The budget the Council has agreed for 1984-85 will leave little room for growth. Decentralisation in terms of a spread of local offices seems dead unless there is a concerted effort to change things soon. Some of the ideas will survive in the form of projects in particular neighbourhoods. In addition decentralisation is proceeding in the case of Council house repairs, which is being treated as a separate issue. Eighteen repairs teams are planned. However, a work-in at a local office by Council building workers and tenants demonstrated a great deal of dissatisfaction with progress in this field as well.

Islington

In Islington there was a round of public consultation to decide on the number of areas, from a range of twenty-five to forty. A figure of twenty-four was adopted and Islington is now well in advance of any other authority. Four offices are due to be opened in the summer of 1984 and another eight in the next year. However, the date for the opening of the first four offices has been put back several times already, so it is difficult to have complete confidence in the target. For one thing negotiations with the unions still have to be completed. The situation on local Council house repairs teams is more advanced. Four are already working out of sixteen planned.

Camden

Camden held a rushed public consultation exercise between three options – one of thirteen areas and two of twenty (one of which placed particular emphasis on local control). The first of these options has already been backed by the Labour councillors (overwhelmingly) and by the Labour party (fairly narrowly), and was described as 'the Council's preferred choice'. Such public response as there was supported the Council, which decided to go ahead with decentralisation to fourteen areas. The intention is to open the first offices during 1984-85, but doubts remain as to how committed councillors really are to going ahead with decentralisation. In particular very few councillors are interested in local participation, even in the form of purely advisory bodies.

DUSTBIN DEMO, July 1974



Haringey

Unlike the three previous boroughs, Haringey has proceeded without any form of public consultation. The original intention was to decentralise into fourteen areas, but the plans have been modified to only going ahead with three of these areas as pilot projects. When the issue of local control was raised early on it proved highly controversial. Since then there has been very little discussion of anything other than the local delivery of services.

Lambeth

Lambeth is also proceeding with three pilot schemes, for areas the size of wards. Public consultation on decentralisation has been restricted to within these three planned areas.

Table 1 – Current State of Play

	Unit of decentralised service delivery	Services to be decentralised	Form of devolved control
Islington	24 neighbourhood offices	H, S.S., E.H., R&M, C.D.	Second round of public consultation on the theme of total control. No standardised form envisaged, neighbourhoods will decide what's appropriate for them.
Hackney	Original proposal was for 22–30 neighbourhood offices. Now very doubtful	H, S.S., E.H., R&H, L(some), C.D.	Original proposal was for a system of neighbourhood committees (elected & with budgets). Now very doubtful.
Camden	14 area offices	H, S.S., E.H., P. R&M	Second round of public consultation on area committees. Strong opposition from within Labour group and existing 5 district council tenant consultative committees.
Manchester	2 Pilot neighbourhood offices. Plans may be extended following 1984 local elections	H, S.S., E.H., R&M, T.S.(some)	1984 local election manifesto included a commitment to area committees. Working group now discussing manifesto implementation.
Haringey	3 pilot neighbourhood offices	H, S.S., E.H., C.D.	Not being considered at the moment.
Walsall	32 neighbourhood offices	H, R&M, S.S. (some)	Not being considered.

This table represents the situation as of June 1984.

H – Housing
 S.S. – Social Services
 E.H. – Environmental Health
 R&M – Housing Repairs & Maintenance
 L – Leisure
 P – Planning
 C.D. – Community Development
 T.S. – Technical Services

Lewisham

Lewisham launched its public consultation exercise much later than any other London borough. Four options were presented to the public ranging from six to thirty areas (some with neighbourhood offices brought together in larger districts). The result of the exercise was only a fairly small majority in favour of proceeding with decentralisation, with support fairly evenly spread between the four options. It remains to be seen whether the Council will now go ahead. If it does there is little likelihood of any offices opening in 1984-85.

MAYORS at WESTMINSTER, December 1981



Central Press Photo

Elsewhere

Walsall was clearly the first authority to take up decentralisation and if the various Councils mentioned above which began work on decentralisation after the 1982 local elections are seen as the second wave, there is now a third wave. The Labour Councils elected in the 1984 local elections in Birmingham and Manchester had manifesto commitments to set up area committees (Manchester had already decided to go ahead with two pilot schemes involving local service delivery).

There are also a number of other authorities which are considering decentralisation in one form or another. These include Bradford, Humberside, Halton (Widnes) and Yeovil. One can add to this list a number of boroughs who became involved in the 'area management' trials of the mid-70s, a largely managerialist initiative which nevertheless has left an interesting legacy – six area advisory committees in Stockport with some interesting devolved powers; the Priority Team system in Newcastle in which a number of ward-based committees have been given considerable devolved financial powers, etc.

Getting Started

There is no single recipe for a local authority to use which will enable it to achieve decentralisation without hiccups. The methods used will, inevitably, have to take account of the specifics of the local situation – how much time is available, how much money, is there an existing well established infrastructure of community groups etc.?

Decentralisation will inevitably encounter opposition from some quarters, for it challenges existing assumptions and practices of many of the local government's senior managers and professionals and to some trade unionists and councillors as well. Whilst appropriate methods can overcome much of this resistance, some will inevitably remain. Once this policy is achieved, it will undoubtedly enhance the commitment of many council employees and much of the community to the council itself. This has certainly been the case in Walsall where many housing department employees now feel that their's is an outfit really worth working for and where the public have already shown they feel it's something worth fighting for.



NEIGHBOURHOOD OFFICE, July 1984

The first choice to be made can be summed up by the phrase 'speed versus dialogue'. Many councils are subject to a mini election on a yearly basis. If political control is at all in the balance, as was the case in Walsall, Labour councillors will simply not be able to afford the time to engage in lengthy processes of involvement and participation with workforce or community. The council will need to have a very clear idea of what it wants and a determination to achieve it if it is to stand any chance of realising even half of its objectives. Considering the scope, complexity and ambitiousness of the task Walsall's councillors set themselves, their achievement is truly remarkable. It is true that they did not have to overcome considerable trade union opposition that boroughs such as

Hackney have faced, but they nevertheless demonstrated a political wilfulness and persistency which is vital if decentralisation is to be achieved whatever time-scale a council may set for itself.

Most councils presently considering or pursuing decentralisation are subject to re-election on a three or four yearly basis. Here, then, speed is less imperative and the issue of popular involvement in the initiative can be given more consideration. Yet even four years is quite a short period of time in which to plan and implement a radical initiative. Islington, which is the second most advanced Council, hopes to have its first four (out of 22) neighbourhood offices opening in mid 1984 — two years after it began!

Why is it important to involve workforce and community in the decentralisation initiative where time allows it?

1. The producers and consumers of a council's services know far more about how things are and how they could be improved than either councillors or senior officers. There is a tremendously rich store of knowledge and imagination here just waiting to be uncorked.
2. Involvement of manual and white collar workers, consumers, back-bench councillors and Labour Party activists is essential if an informal commitment, which can carry the initiative forward, is to be built up. To many council workers, before clear proposals have become established, decentralisation might seem like an intangible but pervasive threat. In some London Boroughs anxiety and rumour has been rife and it is vitally important to involve, consult and communicate on every possible occasion.
3. Democratic objectives require democratic means, as a statement prepared for the Decentralisation Working Group in Hackney points out, 'the objectives of greatly improved services, of increased participative democracy, and of neighbourhood control, cannot begin to be pursued without the adoption of participative democratic methods of implementation.'

The Agent of Change:

Decentralisation involves complex processes of political and organisational struggle and change, to carry this through effectively one must establish a central vehicle through which the initiative can be pursued. Typically this vehicle is built around a small subgroup of councillors who are the most committed to decentralisation. Although in some boroughs this group has no formal status it does seem advisable that wherever possible this group should be constituted as a sub-committee of the council's Policy and Resources Committee (the key decision making body within the full Council).

Who should be on the Decentralisation Sub-committee?

There are some rules which should be followed here but there are also things which are open to discretion. First of all it is important that those who chair the service committees corresponding to the services which are to be decentralised should be on the Decentralisation Sub even if these councillors are not themselves particularly committed to decentralisation. If they are not kept involved and informed they could derail the initiative at a later stage for they may come to see decentralisation as something which threatens their political control over the service they have responsibility for. Secondly, it is essential for regular contact to be maintained between the Decentralisation Sub and the rest of the Labour Group. It is vital that the Group should feel responsible

for all key strategic decisions which are taken (e.g. number of neighbourhood offices, extent and form of neighbourhood control, etc). Perhaps the best method here is to follow Islington's example and hold occasional meetings of the full Labour Group where decentralisation is effectively the sole item on the agenda. However another simple procedure is to keep fellow councillors and Labour Party members in touch with a short newsletter (copies of minutes of the sub committee are of little use as few people ever read them). These meetings should be open to the public.

Should anyone besides councillors be on the decentralisation sub-committee? Some boroughs, such as Islington, have limited membership to councillors only. Trade unionists and community groups have been encouraged to feed into the initiative but through their own working groups. Other boroughs, such as Hackney and Lewisham, have co-opted representatives from the community, trade union and the local Labour Party's own Local Government Committee bodies. We must be clear about the capacity in which co-opted representatives are attending the Decentralisation Sub. If co-optees are to be given voting rights then clearly they are full members of the committee and should be accountable to the organisations they represent for whatever actions they undertake whilst on the sub-committee -- at least one borough has had the experience of trade unionists voting on decisions at subcommittee but then later denying that they had ever taken part in the subcommittee except as observers! It might be easier for trade union reps to have no voting rights. Important decisions will anyway have to be properly negotiated with the unions outside of these meetings.



Carlos Augusto (IFL)

WANDSWORTH DUSTMEN, May 1982

Working with Senior Professionals and Management.

This is where power lies within any local authority. It should not be assumed that 'the bureaucrats' will be set against decentralisation. Many senior professionals support certain forms of decentralisation (it is currently quite fashionable in professional circles) but you have to remember that their motives will be professional rather than political. Indeed there are some boroughs, such as Brent, where the professionals have been the main force towards greater decentralisation whilst the local councillors vacillated and dithered.

Given that this is where power is concentrated you either have to go round this group or work with them. If, as in the case of Hackney, you decide to try and by-pass this group you have to be sure that you can develop an alternative form of access into the organisation. Senior managerial and professional staff have a lot of knowledge about the local council (existing staffing levels, organisational structures, mandatory practices, etc.) which is vital to anyone seeking to change it. The problem encountered by Hackney was that they decided to bypass their own senior officers but then found themselves unable to involve the workforce and trade unions in the process of developing the decentralisation proposals, in other words the Decentralisation Working Group became marginalised by the organisation it sought to change. If senior officers want to be involved then care must be given to which officers are going to be involved and how councillors are going to maintain political control over their work. In most boroughs where decentralisation is proceeding, the officers working group meets once a week and usually a councillor is present at this meeting. The officers working group will probably play a major role not just in developing the decentralisation proposals but also in helping to implement them. For this reason it is important that the officers chosen should be personally sympathetic

Our services are coming down your way

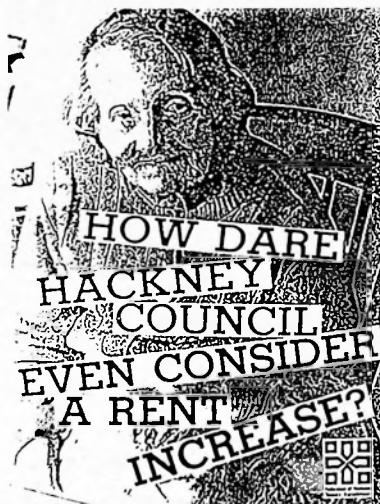


London Borough of Islington

to decentralisation yet should have sufficient status within their own departments to be able to push through ideas and changes that some of their colleagues may prove fairly resistant to. Boroughs such as Islington and Camden have seconded some officers to 'the officers working group'. It may even be necessary to create some new posts just to help with the process of participation and organisational change that decentralisation involves. Thus Islington created four new posts to assist the process of consultation and involvement with the local community and has recently appointed two training officers whose sole concern is training for decentralisation.

Working with the Community

Boroughs such as Hackney, Islington and Lewisham have tried to involve the community in the process of decentralisation from the outset. In each case an attempt has been made to give the community some control over the content of the decentralisation proposals themselves, but each borough has gone about this in a slightly different way. Hackney endeavoured not to pre-empt any decisions and therefore went out to the community with a 'blank piece of paper' and asked the community to sketch what it wanted in the way of decentralised services and devolved powers.



Woodberry Down Tenants Association

Islington arranged a programme of consultation with the community based upon a single proposal on which a political decision had already been taken. However the brief for consultation was flexible enough for real amendments to be made whilst being specific enough for the public to feel it was being given something concrete and tangible to respond to. Both Camden and Lewisham have decided to consult the community using a series of options each one of which describes a model of decentralisation varying both in scope and in cost; the consultation must not be so complex that the public cannot make sense of it.

In both Hackney and Islington around 40 ward-based meetings occurred. They were usually introduced by a video trying to popularise the idea of decentralisation and the meetings were then broken up into smaller groups so that all present had the opportunity to participate in discussion and put forward criticisms and suggestions. In both boroughs a lot of pre-publicity paid off and meetings were generally well attended (attendances varied from 25 to 100 plus). Attendances at Camden's public consultation forum's were smaller because they were rushed and badly organised.

In Islington a clear picture emerged of which services were giving most cause for concern and which ones people most wanted to see more decentralised (the list was topped by housing management and repairs and maintenance and, more surprisingly, by environmental health and services for the elderly and disabled). Secondly it seemed the public were prepared to travel greater distances to local neighbourhood offices than had been thought. The result was that whereas Islington had been thinking of between 25 and 40 offices they decided to opt for between 23 and 25.

A number of boroughs have also commissioned opinion survey consultants to question local ratepayers about existing services and decentralisation as a method of improving them. The starting price for such surveys seems to be about £7,000 and it's not at all clear that they actually tell councillors anything that they don't already know. Certainly Hackney's survey, which was very professionally performed, doesn't seem to have been used by anyone.

Working with the Trade Unions and Workforce:

In most boroughs pursuing decentralisation this has proved to be the most difficult area to tackle. The trade unions themselves have no common attitude to decentralisation. In Hackney, NALGO has been obstructive while the manual workers unions were supportive (in fact they had become interested in the initiative long before most of the councillors) just as the building workers in Lambeth are at the moment. However in Manchester the same unions appear to be fairly resistant (as they may well prove to be in Lewisham).

The problem for many trade unions is that there are no existing structures or practices relating to participation rather than to negotiation. In Islington every attempt has been made to separate out these two elements so that whereas every opportunity is taken to consult with the unions there is a clear recognition that the unions will not be called upon to participate in any way which may later pre-empt negotiations.

In Hackney, NALGO put forward 12 points upon which it sought agreement before they would agree to co-operate with the decentralisation process in any way (for reasons that cannot be gone into here the resolution of these 12 points has proved an interminable process). In Walsall, NALGO was told what was going to happen and the Labour Group there stuck to their guns in face of industrial action until the opposition eventually crumpled. It seems a great pity that in most boroughs the trade unions have declined the invitation to step outside their normal traditional role. They and their membership have preferred instead to assume the more passive role of responding to others' proposals in order to maintain the usual employee/employer relationship. The ultimate and most radical form of decentralisation would involve a partnership between worker self-management and community control, sadly public sector unions seem to be lagging some way behind some of their private sector counterparts

when it comes to asserting control over the labour process their members are engaged in.

How, then, do we develop a programme of workforce participation in the face of trade unions who are reluctant to take responsibility for themselves. They can abandon the attempt altogether and make sure the workforce is well informed (Islington's NeighbourhoodNews is a good example of a regular and well designed information bulletin) and the unions well consulted. At least this way the workers will be given the opportunity to refuse certain proposals even if they can't propose any of their own.

Workers' suspicion is quite understandable as any form of reorganisation will require the redeployment of staff. Thus, for example, certain tiers of management in the housing department may become unnecessary if the existing structure is already top-heavy. Those managers not required would be redeployed either in a more specialist housing capacity or, perhaps, as neighbourhood managers in the new set up.



Peter Loughborough/London Borough of Islington

AREA REPAIR TEAM BASE BY 1986?

New work systems must be formulated but introduced carefully. They must learn how to progress work in hand while constantly exposed to a queue of new cases.

Workers might also quite justifiably fear that councils will devote inadequate resources to the project and leave them to face complaints from a public whose hopes have been raised and, because of the accessibility of the new offices, might find it far easier to complain.

Unless public service unions transcend that rather narrow attitude which is a feature of British trade unionism and become concerned about the nature of their work, how power is exercised, about what they are producing, about the sources of job satisfaction — then in the long run they are onto a hiding for nothing. Putting it bluntly, when cuts and privatisation are on the top of the agenda, if you're not going to work in a way that is appropriate to the needs of the community you serve, they will have no reason to support you when your job is on the line.

Implementing the Decentralisation Proposals:

It took both Hackney and Islington about a year to prepare a final set of proposals. Once produced they should be subject to an immediate bout of publicity (Islington, for example, organised a weekend conference for councillors, party members, public and trade unionists as soon as they'd put their final draft together). The proposals will contain extensive implications for negotiations with the trade unions, some new jobs will undoubtedly be on the agenda and job descriptions/gradings will have to be developed, many workers may be relocated in new offices working with a new team of colleagues and perhaps for a new boss, others may have their jobs altered significantly and totally new job descriptions will have to be negotiated. The unions will quite rightly want more pay for more responsibility and more skills. Yet the Council may have even less money than now.

Finally, you must change attitudes as well as work practices. How are you going to get workers to drop their traditional assumption that the client or consumer is an irritant that gets in the way of work rather than the reason for work itself? How are you going to get caretakers to take more notice of tenants, and then how are you going to get estate managers to take more notice of caretakers, and area housing managers more notice of estate managers, and so on? It's one thing to have worked out your proposals and obtained union agreement for them, it's another thing to make these proposals a reality.

Training is clearly going to play a vital part in all of this. With full union support Islington began to work upon its training proposals well in advance of negotiations being finalised. Two new training posts were created. Together with about 10 other officers, these formed a decentralisation training group and a training programme covering everything from teamworking to operating VDUs was gradually assembled using outside consultants as facilitators of this process where this seemed appropriate. It's not enough however to think of training as the only method to use in bringing about the process of organisational change that decentralisation involves.

The organisation has to develop an entirely new culture, one which is reflective and self-critical, more prepared to take risks, and with the confidence and competence to question all traditional forms of authority whether this be the authority of the white collar worker over the manual worker, the male over the female or the senior professional over the non-professional.

To accomplish this, the council needs to have a process of review whose legitimate task it is to constantly question and subvert what is going on, to stop people slipping back into old ways, to keep an eye on the old power blocks to make sure they don't reassert themselves etc. This group, which should usefully include 'outsiders' (not top whack private consultants but the community-based organisational consultants) should have a brief to help all new units of the council (neighbourhood offices, area based repairs teams, etc.) – to review their own progress at regular intervals after the change towards decentralisation has occurred.

Service Delivery

A local authority must first decide which services to decentralise. Some services operate best from a single central location. There are others where there are both advantages and disadvantages in decentralising. Every council seems to agree that housing management is the principal candidate to be localised.

Much of the criticism directed at councils has centred on housing. Proposals for decentralisation concern both management and repairs. These services have suffered not only from being too centralised but also from a lack of communication between the two. With decentralisation, housing management offices can be integrated closely with locally based repair teams.

Councils have differed on whether a reorganisation of housing should be just one component of a comprehensive decentralisation of many services, or whether housing should be localised first.



AREA REPAIR TEAM, October 1983

The next candidate is social services. Perhaps because sections of this service have already been decentralised. Greater co-ordination between housing and social services would be very helpful in dealing with rent arrears cases – to give just one example.

Many boroughs already have some estate based housing management offices or district housing committees – or other forms of localisation. These offices are too small to accommodate a growing team of social workers, environmental health officers etc; and they obviously don't want to swing away from the progress they are making in their own area. If a tenants' organisation and a group of estate based housing workers are already co-operating productively, then that relationship must be preserved and further developments must be built upon that basis.

Beyond housing and social services there is less agreement. Some councils want to decentralise workers dealing with private sector housing -- principally part of the Environmental Health and Housing departments. A few are deliberating bringing these scattered workers together to form new multi-disciplinary housing improvement teams. Other candidates include planning, payment of housing benefit, street sweeping and welfare rights advice.

How many local offices should there be? This obviously depends on how big they should be. In one London borough, a dozen local offices would have a hundred or more workers operating from each. Thirty offices might only have twenty workers each (This is because it is difficult to divide some jobs so that there will be one worker from each section in each office, unless many more workers are employed.) The fewer the offices the more likely it is that additional workers will be dispatched from the Town Hall to Neighbourhood offices.

There are potential disadvantages with both approaches. With only a few large offices many people will still have to travel long distances to use them. It will be much harder to break down bureaucracy and for users to establish personal relationships with Council workers based in what will be, in effect, mini Town Halls.

A large number of small offices would also create problems. The teams of workers performing a specific task will necessarily be small, resulting in problems in cover with sickness and holidays. The immediate superior in the same department may well be located in a different office causing problems of lack of professional support. Different services are called on to different extents and with a large number of offices the area they cover may be too small to generate a sufficient workload for some of the services which it is desirable to decentralise. This option will also be more expensive as more premises will have to be built or obtained by conversion and more workers employed (for this reason already mentioned -- jobs where not enough workers are already employed to allow the decentralisation of even one to every office).

One solution to the dilemma over the number of offices is the idea of a district or cluster approach. An authority would have, say, twenty local offices which would in turn be grouped into five districts. The major services, such as housing management and social services, would be based in all 20 offices, but all other services would operate on a district basis with one office covering the areas of the 3 neighbouring ones. Whilst this might seem an ideal compromise, this system would create major problems of its own. The major advantage of simplicity, of everybody knowing they had one single place to visit for all the main services would be lost. There would be a major danger that real power would eventually come to reside at the intermediate district level, which would be by its very nature less subject to democratic control than central organisation or the local office (assuming some form of local committee was set up to monitor how they function).

Local authorities have responded very differently. Walsall, whose example has been such an influence over other Councils, decentralised down to 33 areas, although they only got as far as housing. Other Councils' plans vary from 24 areas in Islington to 14 in Camden to 6 in Haringey. The feeling is that something like the former figure is more appropriate for an area the size of a London borough if the key aims of accessibility and informality are to be achieved. This is not to deny the existence of the problems listed above, but those like the availability of cover and professional support are technical

problems which can be ironed out when the functioning of local offices is examined in more detail. Similarly, while shortage of money is a problem, if the exercise of decentralisation is to be at all worthwhile, then it has to be made a very high priority when it comes to spending the money available.

A third key question regarding decentralisation is even more difficult to answer than the first two. This is how to ensure that changing the point of delivery of services leads to real improvements in the quality of services. Decentralisation can facilitate improvements, but it certainly doesn't guarantee it. Local offices need to be accompanied by changes in ways of working. As argued earlier local government is bedeviled by an ideology of professionalism which makes different departments hostile to each other and makes Council employees feel that there is nothing they have to learn from those who use their services. The same obstacles amongst Council workers and between them and the public could easily be created even within a small local office. To challenge this careful attention needs to be given to the design of the offices to ensure that this facilitates collective working and informality. They should be open plan with as few permanent barriers between Council workers and users of services as possible. The relationship between local offices and remaining council central offices is also important. If control over resources and key decisions remain at the centre where those taking them have become even more remote from the public, then obviously decentralisation will be a failure. A high degree of responsibility for taking decisions has to be devolved to the local level and close attention paid to the structures which remain at the centre to ensure that they play a truly supportive role towards the local offices and are not in conflict with them. Once decentralisation has been successfully established at a local level what remains at the centre must be thoroughly reviewed. If multi-disciplinary teams are operating at the local level, this may in turn suggest changes in the whole way local authorities are organised into departments and Council committees. Change on this scale will not happen immediately, but the character of local government must be constantly re-examined as the aims underlying decentralisation lead on to a more and more ambitious attempt to transform the whole system.

Neighbourhood Offices

The most immediate advantage to tenants of a well run neighbourhood office would be the presence of an officer who could take details of repairs that were needed and arrange an appointment with the tenant for a repair team actually based at the office to call round to do the job. Gone would be the system of reporting what needed to be done to an officer from the housing department who would then pass the note to the repair department — sometimes holding on to the slip for weeks and occasionally losing it entirely. Some councils have begun to introduce local repair teams *before* other forms of decentralisation. And would you believe it? The system works! Tenants are actually satisfied with the repair service!

Bigger repairs will be done by mobile teams moving between the neighbourhoods. Housing officers would not only collect rent but would chase up arrears before they got too high and fill empty properties (voids). That depends, of course, on an efficient repair service as much as administration. Many housing departments are already decentralised enough to do this.

They could process some transfers within the neighbourhood. Allocation would continue to be from a borough wide pool of applicants. Residents of the more salubrious parts of some boroughs would not be able to keep people out however. Each office would have a terminal plugged into the waiting list and what housing was available. You could go to the local office and find out what you were entitled to and when you might get it.

Unfortunately, decentralisation will not provide the resources to build and renovate the flats and houses that are needed. The computer might tell you there was nothing available for you. At least it could tell you quickly, and if well programmed, politely.

Environmental Health Officers might save on petrol or shoe rubber by sorting out improvement grants for private housing and enforcing fire and health regulations for private rented dwellings from the neighbourhoods. (Other jobs would have to be organised centrally.) The officers would still be out when you called-inspecting houses or in court—but an officer could take down all the details and arrange an appointment for a visit. Local offices could process rate and rent rebates and housing benefit. They might even pay it out quicker than the central finance departments do now. If they manage this we can expect the DHSS to change the rules yet again. (Or maybe they'll send the claimants' details to the wrong neighbourhood office.) Advice on entitlement to benefits and general welfare rights might also be available. Social workers often operate from 'patches' which are about the same size as neighbourhoods. It should not be too difficult for them to slightly change the boundaries to fit in with neighbourhoods. Childminding, home helps and other functions could then be organised from the neighbourhood offices. This outline does not exhaust the role of neighbourhood offices. It gives an idea as to what they can do.

Local Control

Not all the local authorities considering decentralising services are also committed to giving local people greater control over the way these services will be provided. Walsall didn't even set up any advisory local committees alongside their local offices. Many other authorities similarly have no proposals for any devolution of power beyond the structure involving elected Councillors and Council employees. Take Haringey for example. The local committees being contemplated there will be made up entirely of councillors with the Labour party allocated a majority of members, even for areas where other parties do better at elections.

Those Councils which have taken some interest in public participation in the new decentralised structure have so far produced few definite proposals on the form this will take. On the question of who would serve on any neighbourhood committees set up, the lists Councils have produced are fairly similar — the elected councillors for wards in the area, representatives of user and community groups and some directly elected members (either elected through a single election covering the whole local area or through a number of elections in smaller residential patches). This leaves a great deal that still has to be settled. What will be the balance between councillors and non-councillors? What will be the balance amongst the latter between appointed and elected members? What criteria will be used to decide which groups have the right to appoint representatives? How often will elections be held for the other places and what form should they take (first past the post, transferable votes, etc)? How to ensure that elected representatives are accountable to those who elected them?

Another question which has been occupying the minds of councillors to a much greater extent (although again very little in the way of definite proposals has emerged) is what powers should be transferred to these committees once they are established. At one extreme their role would be consultative only — being able to comment on proposals and a channel for complaints. At the other, committees would have full control over decisions and resources in its area. The approach Councils are contemplating resembles the former much more than the latter. The only exception would be Hackney's first Redprint (since withdrawn and disowned by councillors) which talked of an 'irreversible shift of the maximum amount of power to the neighbourhoods' including apparently the ability to hire and fire the employees working in the local offices. Most other authorities have either drawn up proposals which rule out local participation or, as we shall see later, have taken advantage of the argument that this is something to be brought in at a later phase to postpone any discussion of the forms it might take.

Why are councillors so suspicious about public participation in the new decentralised structure? There are two related worries — that few people will actually be drawn in by the exercise and who exactly will become involved. At a time when nearly all forms of working class self-organisation have declined and local government is extremely remote, it is difficult to see how large numbers of people will respond to the setting up of neighbourhood committees, whatever efforts Councils make to ensure that they are as democratic as possible. Few user

groups are organised, Council tenants are more likely to have representative organisations than any other group, but tenants associations, like any other representative body (including trade unions and political party branches) vary greatly in their levels of democracy and involvement of members.

The critics of local control argue that, at best, committees will be made up of self selected middle class professionals who have the confidence and experience to want to sit on committees. At worst, committees will fall under the control of groups politically opposed to the Labour party. This is a particular worry for councillors when there is a substantial area within the borough where the Conservative party is dominant (for example Hampstead in the Borough of Camden or Hornsey in the Borough of Haringey). Some councillors may even face the problem of having parts of the Borough where the National Front or other fascist groups are strongly organised (eg. Hoxton in the Borough of Hackney, although their influence in this area is now reduced). In these circumstances giving real power to local committees could allow them to make racist and sexist decisions and generally obstruct the Council's socialist policies.

The problem of obtaining popular involvement is not unique to decentralisation. It faces any sort of socialist initiative at the moment. Decentralisation may even stand a better chance of success than many others because people's consciousness is likely to be more easily aroused by local issues, by what is going to happen in their street, estate or neighbourhood than what is going on at a borough, city or national level.

Getting people involved is far from easy, but the alternative is going it alone. You are implying that socialism can be brought into being by a few elected councillors taking initiatives by themselves. Socialism can't be introduced on behalf of people. It needs their active involvement. There will always have to be some central guidelines within which committees operate to restrict their freedom to be sexist or racist, but the problem can't simply be dealt with in an administrative way.

Allowing no voice to the people of an area is hardly going to help shake the influence of local fascists. If some real say was granted to local committees it would be a spur to Labour party members and other socialists to be more active locally and convince people that their policies were in people's interests. If opening up local government isn't going to be a phoney exercise then it does mean accepting that some of the decisions local committees will take won't always be the ones we would have preferred. However, too often left Councils simply go ahead and act against the wishes of local people and neglect trying to explain their purpose and convince them about what they intend to do.

How Quickly?

If it is accepted that local control is something desirable, how quickly should it be introduced. On the one hand there is the 'big bang' approach. Local committees would enjoy all, or nearly all the possible powers at once. Perhaps even before local offices opened in the area. The first version of Hackney's Redprint is closest to this approach. On the other hand various authorities see local participation as something to be introduced in a second phase, perhaps after the 1986 elections when neighbourhood offices have established themselves. They claim that their intention is to embark on a phased process and that the level of powers exercised by local committees will grow as they prove to be successful and there is more of a demand from the committees themselves for greater local control.

While we accept that it is important that desire for more power should come from local people, Councils have a role to play in encouraging people that the nature of local government services is something they can and should seek to influence and that elected councillors are really willing to share some of their power with others. The stance councillors in most authorities are taking now does little to provide confidence that extending local control will be pursued with much enthusiasm in the future.

However they are right to cast doubt on the 'big bang' approach. If committees are set up immediately, without local offices to convince people that a real reorganisation of the way local government operates is underway, then it is unlikely that any but the already committed will come forward. There is a much greater chance of a wider selection of people becoming involved once people see the offices as something they can relate to. This does not rule out the possibility of advisory committees in an area before an office is set up. Any problem with committees acting in racist or sexist ways are best dealt with if powers are extended to them in a gradual manner. The difficulties can be assessed as they occur and changes introduced.

Low Attendance

While we agree that all the powers of present Council service committees shouldn't be transferred immediately to neighbourhood committees and that the process of developing local control has to be phased we must make sure that this actually occurs. This is for two reasons. First any gains in improved service delivery are likely to prove temporary unless the users of Council services have been drawn into the process of monitoring delivery and suggesting further changes. Second, allowing people control over some important aspects of their lives, and encouraging them to push for control over others, is precisely what creating a socialist movement is about. If public involvement is vital for the success of decentralisation, then it has to be conceded that up to now too few people and groups have shown much interest. Few attended the consultation meetings. Those who have come have either been council tenants or middle class residents and professional community workers.

Housing repairs is one service in which there already existed a grassroots demand for decentralisation, yet even this commitment is now in question. In three London Boroughs, joint tenant/trade unionist groups demanded local teams for council house repairs. One of these organisations, The Federation of Hackney Tenants Associations, has reacted strongly to what it sees as the "fundamentally wrong" approach and the "fiasco" of Hackney's discussion of decentralisation. They believe that what is proposed is "a scheme that has been orchestrated by a few individual theoreticians in the Labour party who have no real base in the community". Thus they have refused to "participate in massaging the egos of a few individuals who think they know what is best for Hackney's people". In Camden there has also been a strong feeling that the issue of local repair teams is separate from the more general proposals for decentralisation and changes must be introduced at once and not await any grander plan.

In any re-organisation of local government it is vital that the needs of women and ethnic minorities are central concerns. So far there has been little response from women's or ethnic minority groups to decentralisation proposals except to voice concern. They have been worried about local control leading to power

passing into the hands of racists. In addition, in many local authority areas they have succeeded in organising themselves into effective lobbying bodies on the Council. They are worried that with decentralisation and decision making being more dispersed that the degree of effectiveness they have established will be lost.

Anti Racist Policies

Will neighbourhood committees be delegated the power to give grants to Black peoples' organisations, community groups and other projects currently funded from the Town Hall? A strong Black presence would then be required in each neighbourhood for Black people to get their share. Other minorities might have to be equally well organised. This is not to presume in advance that neighbourhood committees will be prejudiced, but to recognise that a form of political organising geared to getting one's due from the Town Hall will have to change if power is really dispersed.

What will be the role of Race Relations Units, now based in Town Halls? To be effective they will need also to be based in the NOs. It is not proposed they actually look over workers shoulders, but they certainly must be able to analyse results — say on housing allocation. Will it be necessary to have one worker for each NO, or will each worker be able to handle 2 or 3 NOs.

Those affected by all the different forms of discrimination have developed policies to begin to remove this oppression. A Black committee looking at Islington's policies has suggested, among other things, that Black children in care be fostered by Black people. Suppose the Council endorsed this policy? Would it be binding on neighbourhood committees? Would they be able to work out their own policy on fostering — and in other areas? What kind of policy guidelines would the local offices work within?

They are also worried that neighbourhood offices will remain as white, male and middle class as the central offices they replace. Perhaps the one quarter where there has been an overwhelmingly positive interest has been among professional community workers, as shown for example by the large attendances at a series of meetings on the topic organised by Community Work Service in London. There is a real danger that community workers by default, will be the only ones pushing for user control. The role of community workers is already based on taking over from people aspects of their lives they previously did themselves. This process will be further reinforced as they now present themselves as the voice of local people on any neighbourhood committee.

The poor response so far is probably due in equal measure to lack of an enthusiastic or imaginative strategy by Councils for drawing people in and the difficulty of the task of doing so. Very many people are going to be sceptical of the whole exercise and will wait until they actually see something has happened before putting their time and effort in. Only when we have local offices will we fully be able to judge the possibilities of forming adequately representative local committees. However, this is no reason for complacency in the meantime. Both Councils and local Labour Party members need to put much more effort into preparing the ground and convincing people that the commitment to decentralise is a serious one, so that when committees are set up many more people will take an interest than has been the case up to now.

Objections and Doubts

This pamphlet has sought to establish that socialists are, or should be, pioneering radically new structures of community self-government. The objective of left Labour councils is to localise services and political power to the level of genuinely self-identified neighbourhoods. What are the prospects of achieving this?

We concede that decentralisers have by no means settled the argument yet. Here we will outline the criticisms and reply to them.

Of course, the Tories, Liberals and Social Democrats shriek that twenty to thirty local service centres per borough or town is a gross waste of money. In one sense we needn't worry about their opinion. For, radical decentralisation could vastly increase participative democracy, which is real democracy; and the political parties of the capitalist class are obviously frightened of this. On the other hand, it is vital that we are able to directly defeat the Tories in the local battle of ideas, because the decentralisation debate must be taken to the streets and tenants and users won to the arguments of democratic, collective local provision (though nationally funded) against the centralists and private profiteers.

Moreover, the Labour right-wing also argue that we could never convince the ratepayers that new council premises are worth the extra expense. Almost all development costs money. But shortage of money does not prevent socialists from calling for more and better hospitals and day nurseries, or for expensive staff-intensive women's units and race-relations advisors. If we want decentralisation, then we'll have to pay for it; but it will save money in the long run.

The decentralisation proposed in this pamphlet is primarily about qualitative changes. Some new buildings and depots, some additional staffing perhaps, and upgradings for additional responsibilities etc, will cost money; but as the reorganisation is completed, so old central offices will become available to let; and as services improve, so will savings be made — the speedier a housing repair the less the decay, the quicker the social worker's response the better the possibility of avoiding having to take a child into full-time care, and so on. The financial implications of decentralisation must not be hedged, but neither must they be exaggerated. Moreover, the shorter the implementation programme and the more thorough the reorganisation, the cheaper will be the cost; for resource needs will peak during implementation while two parallel systems are maintained for a period.

Some people question if decentralisation is progressive at all. To them Neighbourhood Committees sound like the old Parish Councils. They wonder why we should resurrect the reactionary forms of feudal and village life. But what we are drawing on is the positive co-operative, communal elements of feudal life and placing them in a socialist context. Socialists have always been interested in communes, *kolkhozes*, *kibbutzim*, *soviets*, collectives and co-operatives co-ordinated by a socialist strategy. Surely a system of highly

conscious and busy neighbourhoods under a well-informed and democratic borough (or city-) wide plan is an organisation form beautifully amenable to the local influence of socialism.

If there are pros and cons to local control we should be promoting the advantages and minimising the disadvantages. A socialist council will actively retain borough-wide policies; for equal opportunities, for example, or for restraining council house sales. These constraints will apply equally to every neighbourhood, but will clearly inhibit some local political forces more than others. For example, a National Front base will be prevented from stopping black under-fives from enjoying day nursery facilities, and a ward with Tory councillors will not be free quickly to dispose of all local municipal housing stock.

Turning the tables on our antagonists, we can describe how decentralisation can push Labour council initiatives into Tory areas. In Walsall, the Tories have been unable to close any of the Neighbourhood Offices, even though Labour has lost control of the borough. A socialist decentralisation will require the explicit injection of socialist values into every stage and all aspects. A Labour Council must not be frightened of challenging the myth of the 'neutral' local government officer. People should be appointed who are committed to the policies.

Another argument is that decentralisation, far from providing potential for socialist progress, in fact just reshuffles the bureaucracy around, and can even increase the amount of obstacles presented to the public. We have to acknowledge a real danger here. Much of the current ineffectiveness of a local authority can be blamed upon the lack of power it invests in workers' control over resources and how they do their jobs, and bringing them into closer contact with their 'clients' won't guarantee improving services, but it's an important precondition for improving them.

Some sceptics argue that as the initiative did not originate in the grass roots so its imposition on a population is not likely to stimulate any increased popular involvement. But socialists must find ways of creating a demand for progress, for diminishing social and personal alienation and for promoting the confidence of the working class and progressive movements to demand control over their lives.

Ten to twenty Labour Councils were elected on a promise to decentralise. In Hackney, moreover, the Labour Manifesto was worked out by a series of consultations which swept far wider than the party alone. During Hackney Council's public participation meetings after the 1982 elections the most popular question raised by members of the public was about gaining more local control, (nearly one thousand separate instances recorded).

Tenants care more about their estate than about their city. If politics were taken at that level surely there would be more hope for a struggle to save and improve public services.

The Communist Party of Great Britain, particularly its Eurocommunist faction, support the attempts to change the groundrules of local government. They argue, however, that decentralisation will get nowhere unless council workers are involved, without patient long-term neighbourhood work, and outside of a general strategy which includes radically reforming council finances, detailed measures to ensure open local government and a fight against privatisation. We agree. Through tackling these constructive criticisms we tackle the problems of decentralisation themselves.

Problems with Professionals

A bigger problem than white collar opposition is often professionalism. Why is professionalism so important within the decentralisation debate? To answer this question we have to understand the power of professionalism in local government and the way in which decentralisation poses a direct challenge. The most distinctive feature of local government is its professional status system.

It goes something like this. The legal profession, despite being numerically the smallest, is at the top of the pile status-wise. Lawyers and solicitors constitute the elite from which Chief Executives (the Town Hall bosses) are chiefly recruited. Within a typical Town Hall they look down upon the accountants of the Treasury Department and the Environmental Health Officers (who still retain a certain status because 'public health' was the area out of which local government first grew in the nineteenth century).

These two groups look down upon architects, who in turn look down upon surveyors, engineers and planners. These in turn feel themselves to be above social workers, and they look down upon those working in the housing department. The latter are so 'low' that they still haven't managed to establish a proper professional identity.

Professionalism is an ideology derived from certain occupational groups within which entry and upward mobility is virtually impossible without the requisite professional qualification — the training for which typically involves a minimum of two years full-time study. Whilst certain professions — law, architecture, engineering — may be practised in any number of settings besides local government, others — social work, environmental health and planning — occur only in local government. Within a typical Town Hall at least ten professional groups will exist, more often than not in an unco-operative if not downright antagonistic atmosphere. This has such an impact upon the effectiveness of local government that a deliberate effort has been made to overcome professional rivalries during the past decade through the promotion of what has been called the 'corporate approach' to management.

Whilst today, most local authorities use the rhetoric of corporatism, in practice architects' departments continue to ignore the requirements of housing departments, housing and social services departments continue to work in a way which is, more often than not, contrary to one another's purposes, environmental health departments persist in trying to take over chunks of housing departments, or vice versa, and so on.

The structure of local government is dominated by professionally based departments. In Hackney, for example, there are seven functionally based departments each structured along professional lines. Thus within the department of Planning and Development one finds three professional sub-units — architecture, planning and valuation.

Radical decentralisation would change much of this. By replacing professional with area-based forms of organisation it would put people with different pro-

professional backgrounds in the same neighbourhood office. Social workers would have to speak to, and work with, rent collectors because they would be sat next to each other in the same office.

Moreover they would be accountable primarily not to a professional boss but to the neighbourhood office organiser and to an elected local assembly. The idea is that, for example, an architect would cease to identify primarily with fellow architects but would identify instead with a neighbourhood (eg Levenshulme or Ardwick) with the people that live there and with the multi-disciplinary group of workers that share the neighbourhood office.

Of even greater consequence than the nature of the organisational context within which, say, an architect works is the question of the nature of the architect's work itself. For the one thing that virtually all existing professions share at the moment is an assumption that the community is essentially passive, its only role being to consume what services the professions provide. Not a single professional group allows any role for the community in determining the nature of the services they are expected to consume. The last people local government thinks of consulting about, say, the design and construction of council houses are the people who are going to live in them. Even in planning, where a considerable part of professional training is concerned with public consultation, the consumer is given no actual control over the planning process itself.

It is a paradox that local government has sought to redress the exclusion of the community that its own professionals have brought about by creating a new profession – community work.

Professional values, assumptions and methods are so ingrained in many local government employees that changing working practices will be equivalent to a process of cultural re-education. For example, the whole nature of architecture would change to something one might call 'community architecture' – a form of work based upon sharing of knowledge and expertise, development of the locality's own design skills, environmental education, involvement of local people and other groups of professionals (eg workers in housing departments, under-5s staff) in the process of architectural production itself, and so on.

This is not de-skilling architecture rather it is radically altering the nature of architectural skill. Professional groups, at the moment, sustain themselves by maintaining their client's dependence upon them. The result, over time, has been the creation of whole communities bereft of crucial knowledges and skills necessary to maintain their autonomy from the local state.

Increasingly, then, the working class has become de-skilled and separated from the process of production not only at work but also back at home in the community. The kind of skills that will be at a premium under decentralised regimes will be communicative and facilitative ones. No-one should assume that these will be acquired easily or without resistance by many local professionals, nor can 'retraining' be tackled without also dismantling those organisational structures and methods which support existing elitist, jargonised and socially distancing practices.

The signs are that a number of London boroughs (eg Camden) are opting for a wet form of decentralisation which merely involves the physical relocation of existing professional groups into area offices. The professionally based departments would remain intact, services would be brought physically closer to the people rather than being delivered from a remote Town Hall, but in real terms the world of the architect, housing manager and planner would remain as far removed from the lives of the people as ever.

Unions vs Tenants

So you've read in this pamphlet what councillors can do and what problems they will face. What happens when some of the people, for whose benefit the whole exercise is supposed to be about, take the initiative. Hackney tenants and building workers can take credit for conceiving the idea of decentralising repairs. In early 1984, impatient at Hackney's lack of progress in implementing their much heralded changes, they took over a repair base in Shoreditch. Ros Tyrell, who chairs the Federation of Hackney Tenants Associations, takes up the story.

On May 30th 1984, the tenant occupation of St John's Area Housing Base in Shoreditch ended after 20 weeks of determined but frustrated action. Although negotiations are continuing between the tenants and Hackney Council, the tenants have been left bitter at the failure of white collar unions to appreciate the seriousness and advantage of their demands. The St John's Base was taken over on 16th January, when local tenants supported by the Federation and shop stewards from Hackney's Direct Labour Organisation, walked into the base and took over the repairs service to 2,000 council tenancies. The takeover was in protest against Hackney Council's failure to implement its manifesto pledge to establish a responsive and accountable repairs service, and against the excessive use of private contractors and the running down of the DLO. The Tenants Federation and shop stewards had initiated the plans for decentralised repairs in 1980. Two years of sitting on working parties had achieved very little, and although policies were agreed they were being changed or ignored by Senior Management.

It took over three months of the occupation for Hackney Council's leadership* to fully recognise the tenants' demands and the seriousness of their action, and to start negotiations on the restructuring of the maintenance service. The Tenants Federation, during that time had developed the occupation's demands into a comprehensive plan for establishing landlord services only at local level under strict financial accountability and local control. The Federation insisted on these demands because of the way in which housing finance is manipulated to use tenants' rents to subsidise the private sector. The mixing up of local authority and landlord services enabled the Council to charge their tenants twice for such services as street cleaning and lighting, and tenants' rents were being used to support a whole collection of functions of no benefit to tenants, such as staff employed to process home improvements grants to owner occupiers. The proper accounting and use of tenants' rents was therefore an essential factor in the tenants' demands.

* When the occupation began, the leadership was Anthony Kendall and Peter Kahn. In the fourth month of the takeover, the leadership changed to Hilda Kean and Andrew Puddephatt.

From the very beginning of the takeover of St Johns there were constant efforts by senior management to thwart the efforts of tenants and DLO unions. Their efforts were aided by the Kendall-Kahn leadership who would rather listen to their management advisers than those who directly experienced and operated the services – and all this in a 'Radical Socialist Borough'! Within the few weeks of the takeover, and with the help of some sympathetic white collar union members, the tenants and DLO operatives had transformed an area maintenance base starved of work and on the verge of unviability into the most efficient in Hackney. Despite official NALGO Branch policy to support the occupation, the sympathetic officers who were signing job tickets were instructed by their superiors not to do so. This was despite an instruction from the Chair of Housing, John Bloom for co-operation with the tenants. Attempts were made all along the line to demoralise the tenants working in the base.

The action took on the character of a class conflict with white collar unions and the Council leadership protecting senior management against the tenants and DLO manual workers. The UCATT and TGWU stewards, despite being forced into a retreat from the base in February, had remained solid in their support for the tenants demands. NALGO and NUPE Officers branch played down the fact that the demands would result in greater job satisfaction and responsibility for their lower paid members, saying that the tenants' action was a threat to jobs. This was never the case – in fact, the tenants' proposals would have had a positive effect on gradings – something which the tenants were prepared to see in return for a better service.



Woodberry Down Tenants Association

During the second week of the takeover, the DLO stewards had turned their attention to the main supply depot in Shoreditch – the nerve centre of the allocation of repair work to contractors. During the brief occupation of this depot (Bowling Green Walk), the stewards found evidence in the form of invoices and job tickets, that repair work was being given to a select list of private contractors at inflated prices. The occupation of Bowling Green Walk was short lived because the leadership of the Council sanctioned senior management officers to break down the depot doors and take it back.

The events at St Johns and Bowling Green Walk attracted the attention of Thames Television who, following their investigative reporting went on the air with an exposé of corruption in Hackney's Building Division linked with Freemasonry. Only very recently has Peter Kahn agreed to hold a public enquiry.

During these weeks, Hackney Labour Party was beginning to support the tenants' demands. On April 28th, a new leadership was elected. The new leader, Hilda Kean, was elected on a promise to support the St Johns action and to defend the DLO. While the previous Council leadership was supported by, were friends of, and were close political allies of NALGO and NUPE Officers, the new leadership was not. Events began to take a new turn.

* On the first working day after the election of the new leadership, members of the NUPE Officers Branch occupied the Director of Housing's office in protest against the tenants. While previously, NALGO and NUPE had sat back, manoeuvring in the wings and waiting for the occupation to dissipate, they began a campaign of concerted action against the tenants. The displaced housing staff from the base were sent home on full pay and no cover was given, except for emergencies. Boiler houses and lifts were turned off by council staff, who refused to restore these services unless the tenants left the base.

White collar union members then stepped up their action. A joint shop stewards committee decided to get the estate cleaning staff sent home on full pay. When the DLO convenor refused to withdraw his members he was threatened with expulsion from the JSSC.

The new leadership of the council had already intensified efforts to set up the base as a pilot project, by instructing the Directors of Housing and Finance to 'make progress' in their meetings with the tenants. Several meetings had already been held by this time, but the Director of Housing, Tony Shoultz, had used the discussions to mediate between the unions and the tenants by trying to get the tenants to withdraw and continue discussion through 'normal procedures'. It was these 'normal procedures' however that had forced the tenants to take action in the first place. The tenants believed that the wrong information was getting to the union via the Director of Housing and asked the Council leadership to negotiate directly. This was denied as not being part of normal negotiating machinery. The tenants wanted the displaced staff to return to the base and work with them in establishing a better service, but not under the old conditions. The occupiers had opened the base for longer hours and removed the 'counter', creating a friendlier atmosphere. Most of all, the tenants wanted job tickets for all work to remain at the base instead of drifting off into oblivion. They wanted the staff to have actual responsibility over the work and the accommodation in the base upgraded to a comfortable working environment.

The white collar unions, egged on by militant NUPE officers insisted on the status quo. NALGO offered what appeared to be an olive branch to the tenants by requesting a meeting. Faced with an increasing and serious loss of services to tenants which was already causing suffering, officers of the Tenants Federation, compromised and signed an agreement with the Council leadership to allow staff to return to the base under the status quo, providing immediate

*These references are aimed at NALGO and NUPE Officer officials, not at the majority of union members who particularly in Social Services remained in support of the tenants.

steps were taken to set up the pilot project under the direction of a management committee. The signing of the agreement was a serious concession by the tenants, but the Council leadership was not prepared to call the unions' bluff.

Implicit in the signing of the agreement was an understanding that the tenants would meet union stewards from NALGO and NUPE to put their case directly and settle some of their differences. NALGO had offered such a meeting but once the Federation had signed the agreement, the unions said they were unable to hold a meeting. Because information from the tenants was being passed through several hands before it got to the union membership the tenants believed that misinformation and even lies were being told to ordinary union members. Two NUPE Officer officials appeared to be engineering the union resistance to tenants. At a later Housing Departmental meeting, fed no doubt with more misinformation, the unions escalated their action even further by a series of measures which included *cutting off emergency services* to the St Johns area and refusing any contact with tenants associations throughout Hackney. The local District Office was closed to the public and lifts and heating were again turned off.

The tenants decided to put the continued occupation to a mass meeting of tenants in the area which was held on 30th May. The issue however was decided before then when the tenants, unable to provide even emergency services and afraid that someone might die as a result, agreed to let the staff return to the base on 31st May. On 1st June the tenants returned to the base to start their negotiations on a new structure. At the same time, housing staff were telling tenants in other areas that the occupiers had stopped the base, plus other lies.

Was it a defeat for the tenants? Definitely not. The St Johns takeover had brought to the forefront the whole issue of who really runs local government and for whom. The expose of corruption threw into question the credibility of senior management in the DLO and of a few individual councillors and members of staff. Perhaps the most important fact was tangible evidence of the way local government white collar unions act against the tenants and DLO manual workers, the main victims of reactionary housing policies. Management had manoeuvred to stop Hackney's decentralisation programme taking place and when the people had taken the issue into their own hands, NALGO and NUPE had taken sides with management. The tenants had urged the Council leadership to take a stand against management, but the collision did not take place over the St Johns issue. But elected councillors must confront management if they are to be able to run local government for the benefit of the people. As socialists we must reject the syndrome that unions are always right, and look closely at the attitudes of white collar staff and in whose interests they act. If progressive policies are put forward without threat to working conditions, we should not be trapped into losing the support of the electorate because town hall staff overstep their traditional bargaining role by trying to hold tight to their remote professionalism that has made local government so unresponsive to peoples needs.

(Documentation of the tenants proposals can be obtained for a small fee from the Federation of Hackney Tenants Associations, 380 Old St, EC1. Tel: 01-739 3631).

Action

In this final section we suggest some ideas for decentralisation in your area, and possible ways of implementing those ideas, drawn from experiences in London boroughs. We want council/DLO/tenant control over housing maintenance, for example. So why don't we show the world what we mean? In Hackney, as we have seen, UCATT building workers joined with the Federation of Tenants Associations to do just this, directly at the requests of tenants. Following the base takeover, tenants, DLO workers and the council are now discussing the restructuring of all area bases, bringing all landlord services together and have agreed to use the occupation at St John's area base as a test project for this approach.

Lambeth tenants have been represented on District Housing Committees for many years now. Probably under pressure from these tenants representatives the council has suggested proposed powers for these committees. They could recommend environmental improvements and repair of major defects on estates (which involve repairs to entire blocks of flats, for example). They could monitor these programmes of removing asbestos, major modernisation schemes and keep an eye on how the empty properties (voids) are being filled. They could not actually allocate properties but could monitor allocations, lettings, transfers — 'sons and daughters' schemes, housing for single people.

These proposals would give tenants more power. They would monitor what was going on. This is a big step from simply being part of an advisory committee but quite a long way from helping to actually run the service. Also, these committees cover several neighbourhoods. However, these committees already exist and some tenants reps have long experience in using them. There is a chance they could quickly use these proposed powers. At least in Lambeth the tenants won't be starting from scratch.

We want nurseries to be collectively controlled by parents and staff. So several council nurseries are showing the way forward by allowing joint committees of the parents who use it and the staff who work in it to enjoy increasing control over some management affairs. And parents and staff are demanding complete democratic local autonomy within socialist guidelines. At the same time, 'community nurseries' which have always aimed at more parent-workers control are winning the resources from councils (despite government cuts) to make themselves more secure.

We all know we could tell the council architects a thing or two about the homes they design for us. Well, some of those architects have started to listen. Several design/build schemes have been started up and down the country. In Stonebridge Estate, Hackney, for example the tenants' association worked closely with council architects in designing their replacement units as the bulldozers were welcomed in.

In Islington, the work of some of the 16 planned area repair teams has transformed the situation. Already, one in the Bunhill area is doing 60% of repair complaints within five days, and 80% within ten days. At tenant meetings in the areas with the new teams not a single repair complaint was voiced. Teams are also doing maintenance work which would often be done by private contractors. And to emphasise the scheme's popularity those areas without repair

teams are now calling for their own teams, seeing the rapid improvements in the other areas.

We must also be pulling services and control towards street level. In some localising authorities, community groups, residents' associations, school governors and parents, market stallholders and churches etc, have joined in alliances with the local Labour Party ward branch, launching neighbourhood projects. A neighbourhood project in Broadway Market, East London is promoting a children's scheme, which involves integrating social services, leisure facilities, planners, the housing department and some voluntary sector agencies.

Local councils must also share their innovative ideas and start a new pattern of local government career mobility. Nationally the Labour Party should establish and promote a supportive network of new-style local authorities.

We must also be doing all we can to break down the barriers between different local statutory agencies, encouraging mutual cooperation with education, transport, health, employment, social security, gas and electricity services as well as all the local council functions. All this adds up to a major perspectives shift for socialists in local government. We can use our influence to break down the bureaucracies and build up reorganisation in which local workers and users will be far better able to help our long declining communities to recover and improve.

Services can be returned to the political arena by bringing out the politics of our neighbourhoods, homes, jobs and lives. With localisation and direct public control, we can fashion services into something people will once again be jealous of, and something worth fighting for in the name of socialism. In this way we can lead people locally against the Tories, for more resources, for socialist values and socialist ways of organising. Even if your council isn't committed to decentralisation you can open discussions with local community groups, promote ideas with local tenants associations and local governmental employees.

Costs of reorganisation have to be offset by use of existing staff and buildings. Retraining and conversion — at modest cost — could result in considerable change. The extensive decentralisation proposed here is unlikely to be realised without turning back the Tories and their grant cuts and rate capping plans. Lots can be done without massive expenditure, which obviously councils can't make anyway. It is one of the paradoxical realities of life that real progress comes from adversity; fundamental change from crisis.

Local government is in deep crisis. Although local councils are being starved of finance and their already limited freedoms facing removal, we can use this opportunity with imagination and political will, and as we have suggested, without massive spending, to open up local democracy, devolve service delivery and create the sort of user involvement upon which can be mobilised the working class movement to defeat the Tories and expand public spending.

The process of transforming local government will also be the way to arouse working people into defending it.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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